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# TWO VIEWS OF ART

## A DIALOGUE

BY ARTHUR C. BENSON

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I WENT the other day to the Tate Gallery with a friend, John Fielding, who somewhat scornfully follows the profession of an art critic, scornfully because he agrees with William Morris in thinking it a shameful thing to sell one's opinions for money. But for all that and perhaps because of all that he has a fine and illuminating mind, so that I have the pleasure when I am with him of feeling his thought traverse my own somewhat as a search-light passes still and severe through the night-mist of a harborage.

He was mildly vexed at the sort of pictures I wanted to stop and look at. The Tate Gallery is a favorite haunt of mine; it contains some astonishingly beautiful pictures, some very curious ones, some interesting, some grotesque, some ludicrous, and some, I think, so bad as to have a delicious kind of horror about them which produces a shuddering sort of enjoyment, like the enjoyment one gets from the horned, slimy, bulging, stout things in a marine aquarium.

"I'm afraid you don't care about art," he said to me, with a good-natured rather kind smile, as he waited by me, averting his eyes from some difficult horror which I was luxuriating in. "Yes," I said, "I do care very much about art, at least I like pictures very much; more, I believe, than you do—my taste is more catholic."

"Ah, yes," he said, "it is just that. You don't care about artistic quality. You are on the lookout for quite different things—emotion, interest, color, absurdity, invention—all the things which a picture may have if they are subordinated to the central idea; it's the central idea which you miss—conception first, then execution; it's a question of design and structure and manipulation. Of course, I

envy you as a gourmand may envy a child its appetite; you have appetite, you have not got discrimination. I have watched you carefully, and you pass by some of the best things."

"I don't dispute it," I said; "I quite realize that you have a quite separate set of values—but I don't quite know how you arrived at them."

"Oh, it's an instinct," he said, "rather carefully trained; but the instinct is what matters, and I don't honestly think you would ever arrive at it. I brought a boy of sixteen here the other day, the son of a friend of mine who has got the instinct to the ends of his fingers. He went straight for what I consider the best things; he made some mistakes, but they were creditable mistakes; he gave me the most splendid reasons. I asked him several times, 'Why do you like that?' 'Oh,' he said, 'the man has done exactly what he intended to do; you see at once where he means you to look, and the rest is like—well, it's like the leaves round a flower.' I took him to one of Millais's worst efforts and said, 'What do you think of that?' 'I hate it,' he said; 'it isn't real; it's made up; it's all *put* there.' When he came away he said to me: 'I wonder why English artists can't paint anything with figures in it? They can paint single people beautifully, and they can paint fields and woods, but when there are people in a picture they all seem to be saying to themselves, "Am I looking right?" They don't look at one another or care what is going on, only to seem to care.' That's a sound piece of criticism."

"Yes," I said, "I think there is something in it; but I still do not fully understand. I will not let you say that I do not care about pictures in the right way; I feel the emotion of them very much; these great old-English landscapes—I can't say how they move me; those remote woodland spaces, with the sandy road winding through the broken forest, the far-off plain with the shining river-loops full of golden haze, the piles of fresh cloud with the scattered sunlight, the somber moorland rising harshly and stiffly into the sky—they transport me in a moment to something which I cannot describe—old haunting memories, places seen in dreams and half forgotten, a mystery of tranquil thought. Is all that nothing?"

"No," he said, "it is a great deal; but, all the same, what you are looking out for is the romantic quality and

not the artistic. That is a much stiffer and harder thing. It is like that verse in Job, I think, where Elihu says, 'Let us choose to us judgment; let us know among ourselves what is good.' I do not say that I get so much fun out of it as you do; but if the critical sense is there one must use it; one can't escape; and I can't bear to look at some of the things you enjoy. I am only conscious of a mass of mistakes and misapplied trouble and false effects; the idea is not clear to start with, and the man has changed his mind a dozen times in the course of the painting."

"Yes," I said, "I don't think I go behind the picture. I sometimes see that it is coarse, vulgar, inane, stupid—then I don't look at it unless its inanity is amusing; but what I don't see is how you know what the idea is, and still less how you know what it ought to be."

"Oh," said he, "no amount of intellectual planning of a picture will make it worth anything. Some of the most carefully planned pictures are the worst of all; but one can see whether the idea darted into the man's mind, and still more whether it was all in his mind all the time he was painting it. That is the essential thing; it must not be done in bits; it must be all present, the end and the beginning alike; and to me some of the most interesting pictures of all are those where the vital thought is all there, and the man just fails in execution; that makes a much finer picture than a picture where all the parts separately are perfectly painted and the conception is vague. But I notice that it is just that kind of picture—the kind, I mean, where the conception just can't make itself felt—that interests you least."

"Yes," I said, "when we went together to the Post-impressionists I remember that I thought you had a curious solemnity about you, like a man looking on at a railway accident, while I was frankly amused with a delicious sort of stupefaction that anything so ludicrous could be deliberately brought together."

"Ah," said he, "I don't feel certain about the Post-impressionists; but I am not at all sure that they have not got hold of something very large indeed, though I admit the performance was not equal to the idea—it was like children playing with dynamite."

"Of course," I said, "I quite see that you have got hold of something I don't understand. I don't deny that

you have a sort of sixth sense, and I am sure it is there; I don't understand your criticisms, but I can see that you are going by certain very definite rules or canons which hang together. Do you remember going to the National Gallery with Charles Corbett? He was in a kind of agony at some of your remarks, the agony of a sensible man in the presence of a frantic poseur. He said to me afterward that he cared very much about pictures and had been pretty carefully through all the best galleries in Europe, but he said of you that you were a very clever man but awfully wrong-headed. 'You may take my word for it,' he said, 'there really isn't anything in what Fielding says about some of these things. He doesn't seem to have any respect for authority, and he reads all sorts of qualities into quite worthless pictures.' I had not agreed with you, but neither did I agree with him."

"Poor Corbett!" said Fielding; "he is quite on the wrong tack. He is all deference, and never really sees anything."

"I will tell you," I said, "what I felt by an illustration. I took an Italian friend of mine to my club the other day. We fell in with three literary men in the smoking-room—Fellowes, the dramatic critic, Macnab, the Edinburgh professor, and O'Brien, the poet. They were discussing something with much animation, and the national brogues came out very strongly as they do when people get excited. I told my Italian afterward that they were to me very typical people—an Englishman, a Scotchman, an Irishman. I said I could have told their nationalities anywhere by their accents. 'You surprise me very much,' said my friend. 'To me they all seemed to speak exactly the same perfectly refined English. Indeed, if I had been asked, I should have said that Macnab was the most characteristically English of the three—he spoke so distinctly; and of the other two I should have said that Fellowes's English was just a little more slovenly than O'Brien's. To my ears there was not a trace of distinctive accent in any of them.' I was quite unable to explain to my Italian what the differences were and how half a dozen words from the lips of either Macnab or O'Brien would have sufficed to show their nationality."

"Yes," said Fielding, "that's a good comparison; the differences which I see in pictures are so absolutely plain to me that it is, or used to be, simply inconceivable that

others don't see them—and that is always the difficulty of talking about art—we simply, most of us, mean wholly different things; and I don't for a moment say that there are not plenty of things in art besides connoisseurship, only connoisseurs seldom differ except about details. They have different theories of beauty, of course, and the value of different styles; but the main point is as clear as stability to the engineer or proportion to the architect. It is a sort of mastery that I recognize, a control of resources, the right economy of material, a balance, a unity. Why, I believe," he added, with a laugh, "that you are capable of saying that parts of a picture are good, like the curate's egg. There are no such things as parts of a picture."

We strolled into the room where the Alfred Stevens studies and pictures were being exhibited. "Here's a good instance," said Fielding, "of genius. These things are very unequal—but it is all good. The man was a great man, and all the slightest and most hurried things he did are great. There's a principle for you. A great man is seldom much the worse for working under pressure or for money or by fits and starts. The finish may be careless, but the tiniest thing is great because he cannot help it. You can't be great by taking pains. Whatever you do is just an expression of yourself. The small man is always small. Of course, the great man may make an experiment on the wrong lines and come to grief, but the failure is tragic and not mean; and the small man may have a stroke of luck and do something exactly suited to his powers—but even so it is always a small affair."

I looked carefully at the exhibits; again I was mystified. There was one picture which roused me inexpressibly—the likeness of a dead boy, the heavy head sunk into the pillow, the shroud just revealing the pure curve of neck and breast, the curls lying lightly on the forehead, the lips still red with life; but the purity and sweetness of it all, the delicate molded chin and the eye half closed with that strange look, half of weariness, half of a kind of tender amusement which a dead face often wears—it affected me literally to tears, with the sense of loss and mystery and beauty all mingled in a yearning indescribable. But I could get no further with the portraits, lifelike enough, of solid, dreary men and women; while the studies, the scraps of molded work, the Dorchester House fireplace, with the bulging, muscular fig-

ures agonizingly supporting nothing in particular—it had no meaning for me.

I told Fielding my impressions. He laughed and said: “Yes, old man, you are not a connoisseur; here’s a place which is all haunted for me by a grandeur I can’t describe. This was a gigantic man, a spirit struggling with materials, straining and almost rending them in its efforts to escape and to speak. I don’t say it is all perfect—far from it—but the power is tremendous, and he knew exactly what he meant and what he was at. That is an exquisite thing which moves you so—but that is the least characteristic and to me the least impressive thing in the room. You had better think of me as a sort of mathematician wrestling with formulæ. You are like a man full of health and feeling, stepping out in the morning in some delicious terraced garden, listening to the song of birds, elated by the sunlight, breathing in the fragrant air. But that is not what I am after. I am tugging about a theodolite and a chain, taking levels and measuring. Perhaps, unfortunately for me, the terrace has got to be straight and the angles square; but there is a pleasure in it, too, though it is a grimmer sort of pleasure than you own. You come here for recreation and pleasure; I come here to judge and decide. No doubt you think that you are right and that I am simply to be pitied. You are enjoying the scenery and the sea breeze, while I am looking at the dredged-up ooze through a microscope. Never mind me. Most people will agree with you, and I don’t grudge you an atom of your pleasure—indeed, I see how real it is. But of course you are a sentimentalist, while I am a professional. But you may remember that you owe your pleasure to people like myself in the past; it is we who make the bridge and drain the marsh for the busy and merry folk to go over. A hundred years hence, perhaps, an irresponsible amateur like yourself will be looking about him with rather more discrimination than you possess. I don’t deny the severity of my task. Sin, you remember, entered into the world through law; but sin is not the only thing which law develops; it’s a mystery, but I think it all makes for peace. Meanwhile I get my fun out of it. You must not think me patronizing; I no more patronize you than Moses patronized the Israelites; but while you are gathering manna and dancing round the golden calf, I am up in a crack of the mountain with the

ledges dripping with mist and something awful in the clouds overhead, making me signals which I cannot quite understand, but which I am trying to piece together."

"Go along with you," I said; "I feel like the people of whom Job said: 'After my words they spake not again. My speech dropped upon them.' I am gasping under the waterfall. But I am more generous than you, and I will do you the justice to say that, though I speak with the dignity of ignorance, I do believe that you have something in your mind which you would tell me if you could; but as a literary man let me offer you in return one caution: Beware, my dear Fielding, of metaphors!"

ARTHUR C. BENSON.